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## PIONEER TRANSPORTATION ON THE OHIO RIVER.

BY HON. SAMUEL T. COVINGTON, OF RISING SUN.

*From the Rising Sun Local, April 27, 1877.*

**I**N the early times of Rising Sun, steamboat accommodations or facilities were not first class. Boats were as angels' visits are said to be, "few and far between." The first passenger to or from Rising Sun on a steamboat was Mr. John James, the proprietor of the town. In 1815 the steamboat "Independence," on a voyage from New Orleans to Cincinnati, at the end of four months from the time of starting, arrived at Rising Sun. With the green wood which they were compelled to cut as they needed fuel, she could not make steam enough to stem the current opposite the town, and they bought fence rails of Mr. James, he to take his pay in a passage to Cincinnati. Mr. James remained with the boat until she arrived at North Bend, at which point, becoming tired of the tardiness, he left and walked ahead, arriving at Cincinnati twelve hours ahead of the Independence. That was a specimen of early steamboating.

But the pioneers of this vicinity did not depend on steamboats to take their produce to Cincinnati, where they purchased their supplies. They preferred a more reliable and rapid mode of transportation. The plain where the town now stands, as well as the surrounding country, abounded in majestic poplars, from which were made canoes and pirogues, many of which were capable of carrying five or more tons of cargo, and it was by means of these vessels that the commerce, between Rising Sun and Cincinnati especially, was transported. With one man at the bow and another at the stern, wielding the setting poles with great dexterity in pushing the canoe forward, it was surprising to see with what speed it was driven against the current. Two men would thus drive a well-laden canoe about as fast as an active man could walk, and thus the voyage to Cincinnati could be made in a little over a day's time. The writer of this has heard his grandfather, Colonel Samuel Fulton, say that on more than

one occasion he has left Rising Sun at an early hour in the morning with some members of his family who proposed to visit some friends at his former home in Newport, Ky., as passengers, and some marketing, and land at Newport before sundown. On such occasions I suppose the trip was intended especially for passengers, and express freight. In those days Rev. Joshua L. Wilson, then pastor of the First Presbyterian Church at Cincinnati, occasionally preached at the houses of Presbyterians residing in this vicinity—for they had no church buildings—and on some of those occasions Colonel Fulton, who was one of the original members and aided in the organization of the Presbyterian Church here, took his canoe to Cincinnati and brought Mr. Wilson down, and after the meetings were over took him home in the same way.

As the population increased the commerce increased, and larger vessels were required. The Browns not only had the greatest number of acres under cultivation of any in the vicinity, but they had more intercourse with Cincinnati. Ethan Allen Brown, one of the brothers, was consecutively Governor of Ohio, a Senator in Congress from that State, and a judge of its Supreme Court, during which time his home was, as might be most convenient for himself, at Cincinnati or at the farm just above Rising Sun. The Browns required a larger boat for their own convenience, and as they were very liberal and accommodating people, any respectable neighbor had as free use of it as if it were his own. This boat was made of a large poplar tree and was got out some sixty to sixty-five feet in length as a regular canoe. It was then split in twain lengthwise and widened some four or five feet, by putting in ribs and planking the bottom. This made a boat some seven or eight feet wide, and furnished a carrying capacity of fifteen to twenty tons. Of course such a boat could not be propelled with a man at the bow and another at the stern. Regular walking boards were put on each side, keel-boat fashion, and thus, with setting poles, against one end of which the shoulder was placed, the other being against the bottom of the river, was the boat driven along by men steadily walking and pushing the boat from under them, like a horse walking upon the wheel of a treadmill. This boat was used by

the Browns for their own needs, and by others who transported the whisky that was made at the little distilleries in the neighborhood of one or two barrels' capacity per day, the farm products, the rags, ginseng, etc., that were taken in exchange for "store goods" by the merchants of that day, and went so frequently that it may be said to have been the first regular packet between Rising Sun and Cincinnati. This large boat, properly manned, would make the voyage to Cincinnati in a day and a half to two days, according to the stage of the river and depth of lading.

After 1820 steamboats were seen more frequently, but the people rarely shipped or traveled by them. In the first place, there was no certainty as to when the boat might come along. In the next place, there was no certainty that it would take either passengers or cargo when it did come; and in the third place, the voyage could be made by the canoe about as rapidly as by the steamboat, considerably cheaper, and a good deal pleasanter. The average steamboat captain of fifty or sixty years ago seemed to think that profanity, vulgarity and rudeness toward passengers, officers and crew, were as essential to the prosecution of the voyage as was steam. A passenger on one of the slow boats of the day, as it was approaching a place where the current was very rapid, remarked: "There is very strong water just ahead of us, but if there is any virtue in swearing we will be able to stem it." After a hard struggle and much profanity, the boat succeeded in passing the place, when the passenger remarked: "The captain of this boat is about the only man who could swear this boat through that ripple without the aid of rosin." As a specimen of the comparative speed of the steamboats and canoes of that day, it is told of our venerable citizen, Mr. Hathaway, that he had some cargo ready to ship, which a passing boat refused to take on board. He immediately got a pirogue, placed his cargo on board, started after the steamboat, and in good time overtook her, when "they had it nip and tuck," first one ahead and then the other until they came to McCullom's ripple, six miles below Cincinnati, where Mr. Hathaway, getting the advantage of the gentler current close to the sandbar at that place, got in advance. A favorable breeze springing up at the moment, he spread a

bed quilt (they always had their own bedding and cooking utensils along) for a sail, and, having been a sailor boy, and knowing how to take advantage of the situation, he beat his competitor to the city wharf an hour or more.

By slow degrees steamboats inclined to accommodate people along the shore and obtain their business in the way of cargo and passengers. And yet so little reliance could be placed upon them that it was not until after a regular steam packet, the "Dolphin," had been placed in the trade between Rising Sun and Cincinnati, through the enterprise of Colonel P. James, in 1834, that shippers between the two points abandoned the keel and barge boats. When the trade grew so as to require some regularity in means of transportation, Messrs. Benjamin Bates and George Parker had a light flatboat built expressly and covered with a cargo-box, with which they made regular weekly trips to Cincinnati. Their boat had a mast, and a sail was used when it could be made available. At other times a horse, which they always had with them, with a line attached, was put on the shore and made to pull the boat against the current. Captain Joseph Thompson, than whom there are at the time of writing but very few, if any, older pilots on western waters now living, succeeded Bates and Parker, and did a thriving business for several years. When steam finally drove Captain Thompson out of the trade, he went as pilot with Captain John J. Roe, an old citizen of Rising Sun, who afterward achieved such an enviable reputation and amassed such an immense fortune as a merchant and boat-owner, and the two navigated nearly every navigable stream tributary to the Mississippi.

As steamboats more inclined to receive passengers, passengers began to rely upon steamboats instead of taking the canoes or pirogues, or footing it or riding through Kentucky, which was frequently done by persons going to Cincinnati. It was by no means a rare occurrence for a party of persons bound for Cincinnati to divide, one portion taking a steamboat and another at the same time crossing the river and walking to the destination, the walking party being the first to arrive. The following personal experience once occurred. Two persons had decided to go to Cincinnati. When one started across the river in the morn-

ing to walk through, the other sat down to wait for a boat. The walker was in Cincinnati some time before night. The other waited all day, built a fire on the shore at night and took shelter in an empty flatboat at the landing, and at noon of the second day succeeded in getting on board a steamboat which arrived at Cincinnati some time during that night. Two or three boats had passed up in the meantime but would not stop.

Old-time steamboatmen used to seem to take a sort of demoniac pleasure in refusing to stop at way places for freight or passengers. They were not content to pass by quietly, but not infrequently, upon being hailed, would yell out some insulting remark to the pitiful creature on shore, who was not only willing to contribute largely to the usually depleted coffers of the boatmen, but was most abject in the presence of the autocrat that controlled the craft. For the sake of being transported the poor passenger would submit to all manner of indignities and impositions. Until a regular steam packet was placed in the trade between Rising Sun and Cincinnati, our people were compelled to pay the most exorbitant prices for freight and passage, and at the same time were furnished with few facilities and very few accommodations. But the times changed. The habits, character and manners of steamboatmen greatly improved. The facilities were largely increased, prices greatly reduced, and accommodations so far superior to those of the olden time as to hardly admit of placing them in the same category.

Old-time steamboat travel was attended with great danger. There was a carelessness and recklessness, then looked upon as a matter of course, which would not now be tolerated. There was frequent racing, and all considerations of safety were lost in the desire to out-travel a competing boat. There were no laws to regulate the equipments of boats, or require competency on the part of the officers. Any man that an owner chose might go as a captain, engineer or pilot, and once in charge each man was a law unto himself. The frequency of sinkings, burnings and collisions, and the number of lives destroyed was something alarming to all travelers.